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Killough, J., & O'Neill, D. (2023). Why nursing notes should match professional standing. *Mental Health Practice*, 26(4), 13 -14 . <https://doi.org/10.7748/mhp.26.4.13.s6>

Published in:
Mental Health Practice

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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Why nursing notes need to match our professional standing

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Posted 10 May 2023 - 01:00

Two mental health nurses on how formulaic progress notes undermine advances made by the specialty and why meaningful notes improve care and boost the profession



Mental health nurses are professional and analytical, with a wealth of clinical knowledge and skills. But for some reason, our note-taking does not reflect the great strides the profession has made.

Progress notes are a legal record which encapsulate the care given to the patient and are recorded daily by nurses in a hospital setting. The [Nursing and Midwifery Council's \(NMC\) code of conduct](#) stipulates they must be clear, accurate and timely.

Nursing notes can be formulaic, repetitive and lacking in analysis

In mental health, the quality of nursing notes is variable and not always befitting of professional practice. Daily notes can be formulaic and repetitive, providing a description of routine patient activity without analysis or critical thinking.

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Notes are often written using a similar format and language, with little variation unless an incident has occurred. A prominent feature is the use of a common range of words to describe behaviour, such as 'settled', 'good form' and 'pleasant on approach'.

Typically, meaningful patient-nurse interactions are not captured – the therapeutic relationship is central to effective mental health nursing and yet it is often absent from the notes. Additionally, vital information on therapeutic interventions that have contributed to the overall improvement of the patient are not evident.

'Nurses learn documentation by tradition: these customs and practices are deeply entrenched and there is perhaps an unconscious reluctance to change'

Ongoing assessments tend to focus on one or more observed behaviours and the clinical significance of these observations is limited. This style of writing undermines the role of the nurse, characterising it as merely surveillant and failing to reflect the clinical skill involved.

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This can be attributed in part to the history of the practice, which can be traced back to the asylum system. 'Keepers' or 'asylum attendants', who did not receive a formal education, were required to write daily descriptions of patient activity and the legacy of this remains evident today. Nurses learn documentation by tradition: these customs and practices are deeply entrenched and there is perhaps an unconscious reluctance to change.

Nurses need to make progressive notes reflective of their professional standing

Mental health nursing has evolved into a highly skilled, innovative profession, yet our notes do not always reflect this progress. Undergraduate programmes and post-registration training courses base their teaching on NMC professional standards. But these do not attempt to tackle or dismantle the deeply cultural aspects to progress notes, which have been passed along for generations.



There is an absence of available literature that directly challenges these flaws. Further, there is no clinical guidance which highlights, for example, what data notes should include.

With proper guidance and training, nurses could be empowered to make changes to their notes that are progressive and reflect their professional standing. As it stands, a nurse can write notes that are perfectly acceptable in trust and NMC frameworks, but in reality are not an adequate record of care.

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One aspect that inhibits meaningful note-taking is the fear of liability. This can lead nurses to construct notes in a way that protects them from possible culpability should issues arise. But they would, arguably, be in a stronger position legally if they recorded a robust mental state assessment, rather than notes which provide a timeline of behaviours and activities but lack clinical context.

Meaningful notes are clinically written and capture therapeutic practice

In hospital settings, patients require 24-hour care provision and a daily account of care is recorded to evidence progress. If over a period of time there are no key changes to presentation, though, this can become tedious, contributing to habitual writing that is stagnant and of little value.

A way forward would be to record only when there is a clinical and therapeutic need. While daily recordings may be an expectation of practice, it is worth opening a conversation about what these notes look like. Notes are only meaningful if they are clinically written and capture therapeutic practice. Nurses need to develop confidence in their critical decision making and professional judgement, questioning what constitutes best practice.

'We need teaching which deconstructs why we write the way we write and promotes meaningful, progressive change'

To make progress, new guidelines are needed specific to mental health nursing. Crucially, within these guidelines there must be a focus on critical thinking. Without this there is a danger that any new guidance would lead to a new set of standard statements for nurses to churn out daily without the application of analysis.

Progress notes can ultimately raise the profile of mental health nursing

Educators need to understand and address the deeply cultural aspect to recording notes. The advancement of mental healthcare

has not shifted the entrenched cultural habits seen in practice. We need teaching which deconstructs why we write the way we write and promotes meaningful, progressive change.

Educators must promote this as an empowering process. Progress notes can be seen by nurses as a powerful tool that will improve patient care, protect the nurse and validate the profession.

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Modern mental health nurses have an eclectic range of skills and use their professional knowledge and expertise to make clinical interventions. Writing meaningful clinical notes that showcase this expertise will help raise the profile of mental health nursing to a level that reflects just how vital the role is.